



Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China (Studies in Environment and History)

By Judith Shapiro

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In clear and compelling prose, Judith Shapiro relates the great, untold story of the devastating impact of Chinese politics on China's environment during the Mao years. Maoist China provides an example of extreme human interference in the natural world in an era in which human relationships were also unusually distorted. Under Mao, the traditional Chinese ideal of "harmony between heaven and humans" was abrogated in favor of Mao's insistence that "Man Must Conquer Nature." Mao and the Chinese Communist Party's "war" to bend the physical world to human will often had disastrous consequences both for human beings and the natural environment. *Mao's War Against Nature* argues that the abuse of people and the abuse of nature are often linked. Shapiro's account, told in part through the voices of average Chinese citizens and officials who lived through and participated in some of the destructive campaigns, is both eye-opening and heartbreakingly tragic. Judith Shapiro teaches environmental politics at American University in Washington, DC. She is co-author, with Liang Heng, of several well known books on China, including *Son of the Revolution* (Random House, 1984) and *After the Nightmare* (Knopf, 1986). She was one of the first Americans to work in China after the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979.

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Editorial Review

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Historians have well chronicled Mao Zedong's crimes against the people of China over his four decades of rule, but his crimes against the Chinese land have been less studied. Judith Shapiro, a historian at American University, tells that dark story with admirable thoroughness.

A central tenet of Maoist ideology was the rejection of both ancient Chinese tradition and modern Western science, both of which offered an ample store of evidence to suggest that rivers flow best when unimpeded, that biological diversity is a good and necessary thing. Instead, Mao Zedong insisted, the laws of historical materialism mandated that everything in creation be put into the service of the revolution: Forests had to be felled to make steel for China's industrial development, mountains had to be leveled to make room for agricultural fields, rivers had to be reversed in their courses to provide power and irrigation. Marshaling the people of China in campaigns to clear land and destroy grain-hungry birds, among other things, Mao remade the landscape in just a few years, ordering imperial-scale projects such as the Three Gorges Dam. His policies led to disaster, to deforestation, air and water pollution, and ultimately famine--but some of those policies are still in force.

Shapiro observes that Mao Zedong cannot be held entirely accountable for the destruction of China's land, water, and air; he had, after all, many willing deputies. Still, the political repression he put in place made resistance almost impossible--and even today, Shapiro writes in her impressive study of Mao's war on the environment, his actions have proved difficult to undo. "Until China confronts its uneasy Maoist legacy," the author concludes, "it may struggle fruitlessly to achieve a sustainable relationship with the natural world." --
Gregory McNamee

From Publishers Weekly

Much has been written on the human suffering in China under Mao Zedong, and a growing literature has examined the environmental degradation of this period. In this unique and important study American University environmentalist Shapiro, co-author with Liang Heng of three previous books on China, combines the two themes. Her thesis is "that the abuse of people and nature are often interrelated," and that Mao's China is an extreme case of this connection. Under Mao, China was a place of fierce repression and constant mobilization of the "masses." Through the power of their will and obeisance to Mao, it was believed the masses would develop China. Nature, then, was the enemy to be conquered, but it was not the only one; anyone who disagreed with Mao was an enemy as well, and could be banished, imprisoned or killed. Thus, as Shapiro shows in finely crafted case studies, Mao launched a series of utopian mass development schemes tempered neither by scientific caution nor by democratic political opposition. As Mao ignored warnings on China's explosive population growth, deforestation projects and overuse and misuse of the land led to massive famine in the 1960s. Local practices were disregarded as Mao demanded the uniform application across China of questionable policies such as the forced growing of grain no matter what the local conditions. Through these and other similar schemes, by Mao's death in 1976 both nature and the masses were exhausted and ruined. Mao's most lasting legacy, Shapiro observes, may be a cynicism and disillusionment among the Chinese people that makes them suspicious of any public goals, including the environmental reclamation of China. (Apr.) Forecast: The author will promote this in Washington, D.C., New York and San Francisco, and with advertising in the Economist, Natural History, Atlantic Monthly and the New York Review of Books, this book should reach a hard-core audience interested in China, human rights and environmentalism.

From Scientific American

In China during the Mao years, Shapiro writes, "coercive state behavior such as forcible relocations and suppression of intellectual and political freedoms contributed directly to a wide range of environmental problems ranging from deforestation and desertification to ill-conceived engineering projects that degraded major river courses." Indeed, "few cases of environmental degradation so clearly reveal the human and environmental costs incurred when human beings, particularly those who determine policy, view themselves as living in an oppositional relationship to nature." Shapiro, who teaches environmental politics at American University in Washington, D.C., examines closely such disastrous Mao projects as the Three Gorges Dam on the Yellow River and the devastation of agriculture through campaigns that imposed a uniform agricultural model on the entire country regardless of local conditions. China's environmental problems continue today, 25 years after Mao's death, although Shapiro sees some "apparently serious efforts" by the central government to deal with them. She also sees the possibility that "a government may yet evolve that is environmentally responsible and responsive."

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